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# Using case studies in management education: the student perspective

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## Abstract

Case studies are widely used in management education. Most of the literature discussing the case study method has reflected the perspective of the teacher, implying a teacher-centred view of the case study as a learning strategy. Little is known about the student perspective on case studies. If we are to use the case study method as a component of a student-centred learning experience, then we must know how students perceive case studies, and understand the differences in attitude towards case studies that are found between different groups within the student body. This paper reports on a study of 288 final-year undergraduate students at two UK higher education institutions and is designed to uncover their views about the case study method. All of the respondents were currently enrolled on a strategic marketing or strategic management module on which case studies were used as a key component of the teaching and learning strategy. In general, students believed case studies to be useful as a method of acquiring skills and knowledge. The inherent ambiguity of the complex case study, grounded in business realities, can cause anxiety among some students. There is evidence of marked differences in attitude towards case studies between students with different entry qualifications and with different ethnic backgrounds. Older students are found to have more favourable attitudes to case studies than younger students. These findings have practical implications for the effective use of the case study method. Lecturers using this approach need to be aware of the likely differences of attitude towards case studies of students in their class, and consider these when designing appropriate teaching and learning strategies.

**Keywords:** Case study; strategy; marketing; student perceptions

## Introduction

### A reflective moment

The origins of this paper lie some two years ago in a corridor conversation between the co-authors that began as a mere exchange of pleasantries, developed into a bout of serious mutual reflection on educational practice, and finally spawned the research project that we describe here. Like many business academics, for us lecturing is a second career, begun only after we had pursued prior careers in business and management. Our earlier careers were interspersed with training and educational courses that used case studies extensively. Now, as lecturers, we found ourselves perpetuating the case study method as naturally as we breathed. What we had learned about business and management, we had learned experientially – on the job – or more formally on courses where ‘practical learning’ from case studies was the norm. Obviously, this was the right way to teach the subject, particularly when dealing with the complex, integrative subject of strategy. However, and here the reflection began, was it really so obvious? In particular, observing the increasingly diverse student body with whom we worked, remarking on the range of qualifications they possessed and their heterogeneity in terms of age, prior work experience, cultural background and so on, we wondered just how appropriate a one-size-fits-all case study approach could be. And so, one might say, the story begins...

### A ‘religious devotion to cases’

Business schools throughout the world use the case study approach to teaching business management (Christensen & Hansen 1987), particularly in the strategic management and marketing fields. Almost all college-level instruction in these fields makes some use of case studies (Wolfe 1998). Alexander, O’Neill, Snyder and Townsend (1986) suggest that the case study approach is the primary mode of instruction in strategic management. It has also become a popular method on training and management development programmes within organisations (Argyris 1980; Berger 1983).

Much has been written about the case study method since it originated at Harvard Business School at the beginning of the last century (Wright 1996). Most of this literature, however, has focused upon the merits, benefits, criticism and limitations of this technique from the teaching perspective, with scant attention being paid to student perceptions of this approach to learning strategic management and marketing.

The paucity of research and discussion in this respect is a significant oversight in the overall pedagogic discussion of the case study approach for three main reasons. First, there is little evidence to confirm whether the educational benefits attributed to this technique actually accrue to the students. Weil, Oyelere, Yeoh and Firer (2001), for instance, note a number of studies identifying a range of skills that could be developed through the use of case studies but also note the lack of investigation into the usefulness of case studies ‘from the point of

view of the principal stakeholder – students'. It is quite plausible that both students and teachers have come to accept more by convention than conviction that strategic management and marketing are best learnt through the case study approach. Leavitt (1991), for example, remarks on an 'almost religious devotion to cases' at Harvard Business School. Second, given the government emphasis on accessibility to higher education and the increasingly diverse student populations in recent years, there is a dearth of evidence that students of varying ability and from different backgrounds derive equal benefit from the case study approach. Third, given the profusion of case material in texts (Gurd 2001) and through case clearing houses, and the availability of teaching notes with most cases, there is the suspicion that this approach is popular with instructors because of its convenience rather than because it leads to deep learning. Put bluntly, 'they are a godsend for laziness' (Stonham 1995).

This paper reports on an empirical study conducted in two UK higher education institutions to investigate student perceptions of the case study approach to learning strategic management and marketing. It begins with an overview of the literature, summarising some of the benefits and limitations frequently attributed to the use of cases in classroom instruction. The methodology and findings of the empirical study are then presented and analysed, followed by discussion and conclusions, and a brief consideration of the future directions for research in this area.

## The case study method

The case study method originated in the latter half of the nineteenth century at Harvard Law School and was adopted by Harvard Business School in the early twentieth century (Copeland 1954). Early cases tended to be descriptive accounts of business practice and managerial issues that did not require much analytical or conceptual reflection. The Mayo group propelled 'the case approach to the forefront as the pedagogic tool' for business education, arguing that participatory educational experience is not only vital to students' learning but also far superior to the traditional lecture method (Osigweh 1989).

The latter half of the twentieth century saw the case study approach 'widely disseminated and accepted both in teaching and research' (Hoskin 1998). This period was also the period in which management became 'the fastest growing field of study in higher education' (Locke 1993). The rationale for using the case study method in management education is that it is the most practical way of providing students with a variety of management problems, albeit vicariously, to which to apply the knowledge and skills they are acquiring in their studies (Sawyer, Tomlinson & Maple 2000). It allows the selection of problems and decision-making scenarios, and the level of complexity, in a controlled environment and in a relatively short period of time. Mistakes made in analysis or the choice of action recommended have no repercus-

sions for any organisation, thereby allowing students to practice analysis and decision-making without fear of failure and all that it might entail (Gurd 2001). Even internship or work experience cannot deliver these advantages since neither permits a predictable supply of appropriate problems, nor is there any assurance of appropriate learning opportunities. In short, cases pose exactly the sort of situations students are likely to encounter in their managerial roles (Orpen 2000).

Jennings (1996) summarises some frequently cited learning objectives associated with the case study method. Cases can be used to acquire knowledge, confront the complexity of specific situations, develop analysis and synthesis and relate theory to practice. They help transfer knowledge from the classroom to managerial practice; develop interpersonal skills; illustrate particular points, issues or managerial principles; develop judgment, wisdom, self-analysis, attitudes, confidence and responsibility; enliven teaching, and bring realism into instructional settings. In addition, according to Cameron (1999), cases provide a useful basis for assessment, develop group-working skills and 'highlight tacit assumptions about organisations'. The case study approach also 'offers a vehicle for constructive change', and 'helps unlearn skilled incompetence', as well as enhancing 'student development of verbal and written communication skills' (Osigweh 1989). Harrison-Walker (2000) argues that students are more likely to internalise concepts used to solve real-world marketing situations, and Kimmel (1995) asserts that cases develop critical thinking skills in students.

The benefits and merits of the case study method are not entirely unchallenged. Weil *et al.* (2001) note that the literature 'is primarily descriptive, with no empirical evidence on the use or effectiveness of the method'. Krebar (2001) supports this observation, arguing that the purported improvements in educational outcomes are not underpinned by research. Argyris (1980) highlights a number of discrepancies between the learning theory espoused by faculty members and their actions, implying a gap between the stated value of using the case study method and the actual use of it. Some of the criticism appears to be contradictory, suggesting inadequate research evidence. Osigweh (1989), for instance, states that the case study approach makes the learning process less teacher-centred. However, Forman and Rymer (1999) contend that in practice it is too teacher-centred, with the teacher often acting as a figure 'who descends from the heavens to bestow wisdom on mere mortals in the case'. They argue that teachers can influence analysis by the type of questions and guidance given, channelling discussion towards a particular answer, thus invalidating the 'no right answer' claim. In short, the teacher adopts the role of a conductor or controller.

Other shortcomings of the case study method include a focus on the past and static situations, ignoring the dynamic processes of management (Osigweh 1989, Stonham 1995). Cases, it is argued, rarely provide a broad, holistic perspective of management and encour-

age the idea that management is all about collecting information and making decisions (Stonham 1995). Further, cases are authored texts bearing the imprint of the writer, and so need bear little resemblance to any supposed 'reality' (Cameron 1999). The case study approach depends on thorough exploration of the situation given in any case. With increasing class sizes and deteriorating staff-student ratios, teachers have less opportunity to ensure development of alternative interpretations, construction of robust arguments, and sufficient participation from all students. In such conditions, the case study method is less likely to prove an effective learning tool.

Previous studies of the attitudes of business and management students towards different teaching and learning approaches have not produced entirely consistent results. For example, Young, Klemz and Murphy (2003, p.132) found that 'Empirical evidence supports that business students prefer pedagogies that are active and concrete', while Hunt, Eagle and Kitchen (2004) found that business students showed the greatest preference for traditional (didactic) methods, and the lowest preference for student-based methods (student presentations and group work). There is no doubt that many business and marketing educators advocate greater use of interactive, experiential learning methods (Cunningham 1999; Daly 2001; Schibrowsky, Peltier & Boyt 2002; Smith & Van Doren 2004). Case studies occupy a potentially valuable position in the portfolio of pedagogic methods, since the approach is familiar to business students, and yet offers the lecturer various degrees of student involvement, from traditional teacher-centred classroom discussions to 'live cases' which involve student teams in extensive interactions inside and outside the classroom (Kennedy, Lawton & Walker 2001).

Moreover, it can be argued that the case study method requires students to possess previously acquired process skills at a level sufficient to make case analysis an interesting and useful learning technique. Further, that any given cohort of students using the case study method should be at, or close to, the same level. This implies a similar educational background, fairly homogeneous cultural attitudes, and little variation in work experience or age. The increasing diversity of UK-based students, as well as the growing mobility of students internationally, suggests that undergraduate cohorts are likely to be less homogenous not more, thus making the effective use of the case study method a more demanding task.

From our review of the literature we conclude that the research evidence base supporting the case study method is limited, that the student perspective has been neglected, and that usefulness of the case method with an increasingly diverse student body may be problematic. We now move on from this review of the case study method in general to our empirical study of student attitudes to case studies, by which we aim to contribute to these gaps in knowledge.

## Method

### Questionnaire administration and respondent characteristics

The overall aim of the empirical study was to investigate the attitudes towards the case study method of final-year undergraduate marketing and management students who have received considerable exposure to case study teaching. Student attitudes were investigated using a self-administered questionnaire which included seven questions about the respondent (gender, age, ethnicity, entry qualifications and three questions about work experience), and 24 questions using a four-point Likert scale (*agree strongly* to *disagree strongly*) on attitudes to case studies. These 24 questions and the mean responses to them are listed in the appendix. Additionally, a final open question on the questionnaire invited respondents to add free-form comments about the use of case studies (48 respondents provided comments in the 2003 sample). The questionnaire was first developed in 2002, when an initial draft was subjected to review by a panel of experienced management lecturers familiar with the case study method. A modified version of the questionnaire was then administered to a sample of 210 students at Middlesex University (Brennan & Ahmad 2003). Since that questionnaire proved robust, and in order to maintain data comparability between the 2002 sample and the 2003 sample, the questionnaire administered in 2003 was identical to the previous version but for two minor changes. First, an additional question on ethnicity was included. The level 1 ethnic categories from the 2001 UK national census were used in this additional question. Second, a minor improvement in the 2003 questionnaire was the inclusion of respondent age as a metric variable, rather than as a nominal variable. This enabled more sophisticated analysis to be undertaken of the relationship between age and attitudes to the case study method.

The questionnaire was administered to final-year students at Middlesex University (those taking 'Strategic Marketing' and 'Contemporary Issues in Business') and at the Southampton Institute (students taking 'Contemporary Strategic Marketing'). The case study method is used extensively on all of the modules/units that were included in the study. In all 288 responses were received. Analysis was conducted using SPSS version 11.0 for Windows. Tables 1 through 4 show some of the characteristics of the sample. The mean age of the respondents was 22.2 years; men (48.3%) and women (51.7%) were more or less equally represented.

Table 1 shows that the modal entry qualification was A levels, followed quite closely by GNVQ advanced (or 'vocational A levels'). However, Southampton Institute respondents were significantly more likely to have A levels than Middlesex University respondents (chi-squared value better than 1%).

Table 2 shows that the modal ethnic group for all respondents was White, but that the modal group for

Qualification	Middlesex University	Southampton Institute	Total	Percentage
A level	67	52	119	41.5
GNVQ advanced	62	21	83	28.9
Access	19	1	20	7.0
Overseas high school	21	5	26	9.1
Other	37	2	39	13.6
Total	206	81	287	

**Table 1: Respondent entry qualifications**

Ethnicity	Middlesex University	Southampton Institute	Total	Percentage
White	42	69	111	38.8
Mixed	5	2	7	2.4
Asian or Asian British	78	3	81	28.3
Black or Black British	38	3	41	14.3
Chinese	28	1	29	10.1
Other	14	3	17	5.9

**Table 2: Respondent ethnicity**

Part-time work	Middlesex University	Southampton Institute	Total	Percentage
None	90	40	130	45.3
<10 hrs	27	12	39	13.6
10-20 hrs	70	28	98	34.1
>20 hrs	19	1	20	7.0

**Table 3: Current part-time work commitment**

Age group	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
19-20	54	19.0
21-22	165	58.1
23-24	40	14.0
25-26	11	3.9
27 or older	14	5.0
Total	284	100.0

**Table 4: Age distribution of respondents**

Middlesex University respondents was Asian/Asian British. The north London population from which Middlesex University students are drawn is much more ethnically diverse than the population of Southampton. According to government statistics while 90.9% of the population of England is White, 92.4% of the population of Southampton is White, and 74.0% of the population of the London Borough of Barnet is White (<http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk>). Recent internal data has confirmed that the modal ethnic group at Middlesex University Business School is Asian/Asian British, so we conclude that our sample is representative of the relevant student body.

Concerning work experience, 42.4% of respondents claimed to have had full-time work experience (defined as working full-time for the same employer for more than six months), and 92.3% had part-time work experience. Table 3 shows the current part-time work commitments of the respondents.

While the mean age of the respondents was 22.2 years (standard deviation 3.45), the age range was from 19 to 52 years. Table 4 shows the distribution of respondents by age category. What might be regarded as an unusually wide age range for an undergraduate course can be explained by the success of Middlesex University in pursuing its strategic aim of attracting a diverse student body. The majority of respondents were, nevertheless, in the conventional age range for undergraduate students, namely their early 20s. However, the inclusion of 25 students aged 25 or older (of whom nine were aged 30 or over) enabled us to explore the relationship between student age and attitudes towards case studies.

## Hypotheses and analytical approach

The overall analytical approach comprised:

- ❖ Analysis of the responses to the final open question to try to identify common themes. The qualitative data analysis tool QSR NVivo 2.0 was used to facilitate this analysis.
- ❖ Cross-sectional analysis of the 2003 data set to establish the degree of covariance between attitudes to case studies and respondent characteristics (gender, age and so on).
- ❖ Comparison of the 2003 Middlesex University data with the equivalent 2002 data to establish whether there was consistency in attitudes through time.

For each respondent characteristic (age, gender, etc.) appropriate statistical tests were used to establish whether there were differences in attitudes towards case studies. Specifically, t-tests were used for binary characteristics (e.g. gender), one-way analysis of variance was used for multi-category characteristics (e.g. ethnicity), and bivariate correlation was used for age. The 24 attitude questions were treated as the dependent (or 'response') variables. These questions were converted into numerical values by counting 'disagree strongly' as a score of 1, 'disagree' as 2, 'agree' as 3, and 'agree strongly' as 4 – giving an effective scale from 1 to 4 with

2.5 as the midpoint. Significance tests were conducted for each of the 24 scaled questions against each respondent characteristic. In addition, a construct variable ('positive attitude') was created by taking the sum of the scores for the 14 attitude questions that were phrased positively about case studies (e.g. 'I usually learn something new during case study discussions') and this was also tested for significant differences according to respondent characteristics. A factor analysis of the 24 questions confirmed that the 14 items included in 'positive attitude' loaded on to a single factor; Cronbach's alpha for the 14 items was 0.88, showing high internal reliability.

The following five specific hypotheses were tested (they are stated in the null form).

*Hypothesis 1:* There is no difference between men and women in their attitudes towards the case study method.

*Hypothesis 2:* There is no difference between those with more and less work experience in their attitudes towards the case study method.

*Hypothesis 3:* There is no difference between those with different entry qualifications in their attitudes towards the case study method.

*Hypothesis 4:* There is no difference between older and younger students in their attitudes towards the case study method.

*Hypothesis 5:* There is no difference between ethnic groups in their attitudes towards the case study method.

## Findings

### Responses to the open question

The questionnaire included an open question designed to elicit free-form responses, phrased thus: 'Is there anything else that you would like to say about the use of case studies in management or marketing education?' In the 2003 survey, 48 students responded to this question. These responses were coded qualitatively, with the help of the qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo 2.0. The codes were allowed to emerge from the data, since we had no preconceptions about how students would respond to the question. We found that the responses fell into three principal codes: favourable remarks, unfavourable remarks, and remarks on learning strategy. The learning strategy code was further sub-divided into general remarks, remarks to do with assessment, and remarks about ambiguity. These findings are illustrated in Table 5.

Favourable remarks outnumbered unfavourable remarks roughly two to one. It would be wrong to attribute too much significance to this ratio, but it is at least consistent with the generally favourable attitudes towards case studies that we found in the analysis of the quantitative data (see below). What was interesting about the unfavourable remarks was the degree of cynicism that

Code	Sub-codes	Illustrative quotation
Favourable remarks	None	1. 'Case studies are an excellent way of putting theories into real life situations.'
Unfavourable remarks	None	2. 'I have never found case studies any use in learning things. As far as I am concerned it's just a convenient teaching method, even though it's no use in teaching a subject to a student.'
Learning strategy	General remarks	3. 'Its effectiveness depends on the lecturer's ability to skilfully draw out the answers from students through guided questions. Case studies help me to look beyond the surface meanings of the report and unmask the hidden motives, and techniques, that drive strategy.'
	Assessment	4. 'Don't feel case studies are a good way to examine students, as there is never a clear right or wrong answer.'
	Ambiguity	5. 'The answers to case studies are not very clear and when you're not used to thinking strategically you end up not actually realising what you're doing. To be handing in coursework not actually sure of what you did is a bit scary, especially in your final year. But I'm not against case studies at all!'

**Table 5: Coding and illustrations from the open question**

some of them betrayed – illustrative quotation 2 in table 5 is an example of this. A minority of students sees the use of the case study method as a 'cop-out' by the lecturer, as a learning strategy that suits the teacher rather than the student. This is not a prevalent attitude among students. Nevertheless, we suggest that lecturers proposing to use the case study method should take into account the possibility that a small minority of students may hold such a view when designing their learning strategies.

On the other hand, several of the remarks made by students about the use of case studies as a component of

a learning strategy were positive, indicating a degree of engagement with and reflection upon the learning methods employed (see illustrative quotation 3). Ambiguity was a recurring theme. The ambiguity that is often found in case studies was a cause of anxiety to some students (see illustrative quotation 5). Nevertheless, those who commented on this aspect of the case study method seemed to understand that ambiguity is an inevitable consequence of dealing with material that is trying to reflect the reality of business decision-making.

Characteristic	Test employed	Southampton Institute	Middlesex University	All respondents
Gender	T test	T = .789 (.432)	T = 1.718 (.087)	T = 1.739 (.083)
Worked F/T?	T test	T = 1.182 (.241)	T = .287 (.774)	T = 1.547 (.123)
Worked P/T?	T test	Insufficient data	T = .884 (.378)	T = 1.441 (.151)
P/T work now?	ANOVA	F = .184 (.907)	F = 1.012 (.389)	F = .757 (.519)
Entry qualifications	ANOVA	Insufficient data	F = 4.740 (.000)	F = 5.045 (.001)
Age	Correlation	R = -.217 (.063)	R = .152 (.039)	R = .148 (.017)
Ethnic group	ANOVA	Insufficient data	F = 2.543 (.030)	F = 3.734 (.003)
Mean score 'positive attitude'		38.5	41.8	40.9

**Table 6: Statistical significance of differences in mean 'positive attitude' to case studies**

## Analysis of the structured questions

Table 6 summarises the results of statistical tests for differences in mean 'positive attitude' towards case studies for the various respondent characteristics measured in the questionnaire. Each cell shows first the appropriate test statistic, followed by the exact significance level (in brackets). Results at better than the 5% significance level are highlighted in light grey, and at better than the 1% significance level in dark grey. The greater homogeneity, and smaller size, of the sample from Southampton Institute makes it impossible to calculate meaningful test statistics for this sub-sample on some of the tests – for example, the vast majority of the Southampton respondents were White, so that there were too few ethnic minority respondents to calculate sensible mean scores.

The results shown in table 6 suggest that null hypotheses 1 (gender differences) and 2 (work experience differences) should be accepted – case study attitudes seem not to vary systematically between men and women, or between those with more and less work experience. This corroborates the findings from the analysis of the 2002 data set (Brennan & Ahmad 2003).

The data suggest that null hypotheses 3 (entry qualifications), 4 (age) and 5 (ethnic background) should be rejected – case study attitudes do vary systematically with entry qualification type, age, and ethnic background. In the case of entry qualifications and age these results also corroborate and reinforce the analysis of the 2002 data set. Ethnic background was not tested in the 2002 survey, so this is a new finding.

## Discussion

The results of the hypothesis tests suggest that student attitudes towards case studies vary by age, ethnic background and entry qualifications. By exploring the specific question items on which groups of respondents disagree it is possible to gain further insight into the nature of these differences.

It is worth observing that although the overall hypothesis of difference between men and women in their attitudes towards case studies has been rejected, we did find some interesting differences on individual items that may have some relevance to educational practice. In particular, women were significantly more likely than men to agree that 'I don't like contributing to case discussions in class because my comments might not be right'. Men were more likely than women to agree that they usually contribute to case study discussions. There is evidence, therefore, that women are less inclined than men to participate in class discussions of case studies.

With regard to entry qualifications, two effects seem to be at work. First, there is a tendency for those with A level entry to have a more positive attitude towards case studies than those with GNVQ advanced (vocational A level) entry. Second, those students who had been admitted through an access course, and those with qual-

ifications from an overseas high school, were more likely to agree that case studies improved their confidence in expressing opinions, and were more likely to agree that case studies helped them to improve their business skills. For different reasons it is likely that entrants with access course qualifications and overseas qualifications would lack confidence compared to other student groups; the former because they have entered university with less traditional qualifications, the latter because they come from a different national educational system and may be less familiar with the British system. It appears that case studies may be beneficial in developing confidence among these groups.

There is a broad positive correlation between student age and a positive attitude towards the case study method. Looking at correlations for individual question items, the strongest positive correlation with age is found for 'I usually learn something new during case study discussions'. There is also evidence that older students are more likely to contribute to case study discussion in class. It may be the case that older students, who can generally be expected to be more mature, find it easier than younger students to accept the ambiguity and uncertainty that are often found in strategic marketing and management case studies. This suggests that older students may be a valuable resource for the lecturer, and can assist in explaining the nature of the case study method to younger students. Where group learning is used, this would suggest that groups should, where possible, include older and younger students.

Evidence has been found of differences in attitudes towards case studies between different ethnic groups. Looking in more detail at the results for the Middlesex University sample (a highly ethnically diverse sample), it is clear that much of the difference can be explained by differences in response from Asian/Asian British students, and Black/Black British students. Asian/Asian British students have markedly less favourable attitudes towards case studies than Black/Black British students. For example, Black students agree much more strongly than Asian students that case studies enhance their presentation skills, are a good way to practice analytical tools, that they usually learn something new from a case study discussion, and that they usually prepare in advance for a case study seminar. Asian students (and Chinese students) agree more strongly than Black or White students that they don't like to contribute to case discussions in class, and that case studies are a waste of time because they will never encounter the same situation themselves. On the basis of this study it is possible only to speculate about the reasons for these differences. For example, it is possible that because of cultural differences, Black students are simply inclined to offer more favourable opinions on educational matters generally. However, it is also possible that the observed results reflect a real difference rather than a measurement effect, in which case the less favourable attitudes of Asian students would be matter of concern since it could adversely influence their progress on courses taught using the case study method.



## Conclusion and implications

The results of this study have corroborated and extended the findings from a previous study using essentially the same instrument (Brennan & Ahmad 2003). We have found stability between the 2003 study reported here and the earlier 2002 study in terms of the systematic variation in attitudes to case studies between older and younger students, and between students with different university entry qualifications. Rather unexpectedly, perhaps, work experience seems to have little effect on student attitudes to case studies. Although there are few attitude differences between male and female students towards case studies, it does appear that men are more likely to express their opinions during case study discussions. The addition of a question on ethnicity to the research instrument has uncovered some very interesting differences in attitude towards case studies between different ethnic groups.

Clearly, while having answered some questions, this study has raised a number of new and important issues deserving of further research. In particular, while the predominantly quantitative approach used in this study has enabled us to identify between-group attitudinal differences, it has offered only limited insight into the reasons underlying those differences. A qualitative approach, based around in-depth interviews or focus group discussions with students, would be needed to begin to get a clearer understanding of *why* older students, students with A level entry, and Black/Black British students have particularly favourable attitudes towards case studies. Equally, it is a matter of some concern that – so it seems – Asian/Asian British students have significantly less favourable attitudes towards case studies than the average. A qualitative study among this group would help to establish the basis for these attitudes, and whether this is a substantive issue that potentially affects the quality of education received by this group. Could it be, for example, that the choice of which case studies to use might influence the attitudes of different ethnic groups towards the case study method? There are marked differences in patterns of employment between ethnic groups in the UK (Smith 2002). Certain ethnic minorities are less likely to be employed in managerial positions, and more likely to be self-employed, than members of the majority White population (Cabinet Office 2003). Hence, the selection of standard case studies dealing with senior managerial issues in large PLCs may not match the life-experience of ethnic minority students as well as that of White students. This issue merits further investigation.

In this study we measured ethnic group membership at a high level of aggregation. This limits the degree of detail in our analysis of differences between ethnic groups. A key limitation is that we have not differentiated between members of an ethnic group born and educated in the UK, and members of the same ethnic group born and educated overseas (for example, British born Chinese compared to overseas students born and primarily educated in China). This needs further investigation.

Concerning the implications for educational practice, we feel that there is now a sufficient weight of evidence to conclude that lecturers in marketing and strategic management who employ the case study method must be responsive to the attitudes of different groups within the student population. Older students (aged over 25) are potentially a valuable resource, with typically more favourable attitudes to case studies. Where student working groups are used for case study work, it is advisable to spread older students between the groups, rather than to permit them to form their own groups. Lecturers need to be aware that female students may be less willing to participate in class discussions of case studies. Finally, lecturers need to be aware that certain ethnic groups may hold less favourable attitudes towards case studies than others. On the basis of our evidence, Asian students hold less favourable attitudes than Black students, and Asian and Chinese students appear to be rather more sceptical than other ethnic groups about the usefulness of the case study method. While this finding does not lead to any easy prescriptions for practice, it indicates a need for the lecturer to be aware of and sympathetic to the ethnic mix in the class when developing and implementing a case study course.

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## Appendix: Student attitude questions

*The following 24 questions were used to explore student attitudes to case studies. The mean response (all respondents) is shown in brackets. This is calculated on a scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 4 (agree strongly).*

- a. Case studies help me understand theoretical concepts (3.09)
- b. Case studies illustrate how business/marketing strategy works in the real world (3.20)
- c. Case studies are a good way to practice using analytical tools (3.13)
- d. Case studies help me understand how business decisions are made (3.00)
- e. Case studies are a useful way to discuss business problems in the class (3.27)
- f. Case studies usually have definite answers (2.18)
- g. Analysing case studies gives me the confidence to express opinions (2.80)
- h. Case study analysis helps me to develop useful business skills (2.83)
- i. Doing case study work has helped me to develop my presentational skills (2.60)
- j. Doing case study work has helped me to develop my skills in business analysis (3.01)
- k. Doing case study work has helped me to develop my skill in business report writing (2.53)
- l. Doing case study work has helped me to develop my team-working skills (2.83)
- m. Case studies are helpful in understanding complex problems (2.97)
- n. Case study based assessment is a fair test of knowledge (2.69)
- o. It is not always clear what the 'right answer' is with a case study (3.21)
- p. I usually prepare for case study discussions before seminars (2.83)
- q. I usually contribute to case study discussions in class (3.05)
- r. I don't like contributing to case discussions in class because my comments might not be 'right' (2.10)
- s. There is usually not enough information in a case study (2.57)
- t. Case studies are a waste of time because I will never be in that position myself (1.88)
- u. I usually learn something new during case study discussions (2.98)
- v. Case study discussions are a waste of time because the same people always talk (2.16)
- w. Case study discussions are not fair because students can 'hide' during the discussions (2.47)
- x. Often there is too much information in a case study (2.24)